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## **MacIntyre on Virtue and Organisation**

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### **Abstract**

This paper introduces the work of moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in the area of virtue and organisation. It aims to provide one point of entry to MacIntyre's work for readers who have not been introduced to it and makes some novel suggestions about its development for those who have. Following some initial comments on MacIntyre's approach to social science it traces the development of his ideas on organisation from 1953 to 1980 before outlining the general theory of virtues, goods, practices and institutions which emerged in the publication of his seminal *After Virtue* in 1981. Finally the paper outlines some of the uses to which these ideas have been put in the organisational literature.

### **Introduction**

Alasdair MacIntyre is known as a moral philosopher rather than as an organisation theorist and he has indeed been self-critical in respect of his lack of attention to, what he has termed, the "productive crafts" (MacIntyre 1994a: 284). However the growth of his influence across social science since the publication of his seminal *After Virtue* in 1981 (Soloman 2003: 142) has extended to work within organisation science though much of this work continues to be contested.

It is in this context that we have written this paper. Its purposes are threefold. First to introduce MacIntyre's ideas on virtue in the context of organisation, second to trace the development of these ideas and finally to sketch some of the uses to which they have been put in the organisational literature. If successful, it will provide one point of entry to MacIntyre's work for readers who have not been introduced to it and make some novel suggestions about its development for those who have.

MacIntyre's critique of contemporary organisations has formed a remarkably consistent feature of work that has in wider respects been noted for the changes evident in its ideological commitments (Horton and Mendus 1994: 1; Borradori 1994; MacIntyre 1994b). In attempting to present elements of his work to make this case, our selections reflect authorial intent more than the structure of his original arguments. We hope that we have done no violence to the original but are aware that this paper is no substitute for it.

The paper begins with some preliminary commentary on epistemology, without which our notion of his 'general theory' might too easily be seen as a set of abstractions. It traces MacIntyre's occasional work on contemporary organisations between 1953 and

1980 and suggests that his empirical research with practicing managers in the power industry alerted MacIntyre to the parallels between the compartmentalisation of moral positions within individuals' roles as managers, citizens and family member and the victory of emotivism over other moral philosophies in the modern age. The paper then provides an account of what we claim to be his 'general theory' of virtues, goods, practices and institutions which appeared with *After Virtue*. It concludes with an account of the use of MacIntyre's ideas in the organisational sciences literatures.

### **MacIntyre as critical realist**

Among the relatively fixed points of MacIntyre's moving ideological commitments is his critical realist approach to method in social science (see Turner 2003). MacIntyre sees relations between social structures, social roles (and characters) and the framework of ideas in which agency comes to be understood as intimate. The factors that agents take to be motives for and justifications of action are historically rooted in the type of social roles and ideologies which frame the relations between motives and action.

For example, the modern noumenal self needs little justification for action other than it be freely chosen, whereas the ancient self of Greek civilisation could not have so justified her action because she had not acquired a notion of free choice. For her, freedom to choose extended only to alternative means of fulfilling a social role in a set of circumstances whose understanding included that of the range of actions required by those who inhabit her social role (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 58-59).

It follows that MacIntyre has consistently rejected understandings of social science as science (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 88-108), in which human behaviour can be explained, predicted and at least in part controlled through the identification of relationships between variables, precisely because the understanding of those variables is peculiar to social structures in which concepts express relationships characteristic of those structures (MacIntyre 1978 [1971]: 83-84).

MacIntyre presents an extended argument in Chapters 6 to 8 of *After Virtue* in which these notions are applied to the claim to expertise relied on by managers for their authority (*pace* Weber). This is the claim "to possess systematic effectiveness in controlling certain aspects of social reality" (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 74). MacIntyre argues that such expertise (and the education that promises its transference) requires the demonstration of law-like generalizations, hypotheses of causation which predict and explain in the same way as those in natural science (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 88-105). However, sources of unpredictability in human action (including the notions through which behaviour is understood) are such to render knowledge of this kind impossible.

MacIntyre concludes that the idea of management's expertise in controlling social outcomes is a myth whose purpose is the maintenance of an ideology in which the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative action is obscured in the name of effectiveness (see also Brehony 2002). The limits MacIntyre places around the claims of social science are no proxy, however, for a commitment to social constructivism (and its post-modern allies) in its denial of the possibility of truth (see for example, Borradori 1994: 265).

MacIntyre's position is liable to cause readers some confusion and one commentator has observed that "it may be MacIntyre's special distinction to strike half of his readers as an old-fashioned universalizing metaphysician (since he defends a version of tradition and teleology) while striking the other half as a dangerous relativist" (Higgins 2004: 35).

Achtemeier (1994) offers a solution to this problem in arguing that MacIntyre's approach to social science may be labelled 'critical realist' (Bhaskar 1975; Hartwig 2005). At the risk of over-simplification critical realism can be characterised as an approach which maintains the existence of an objective reality (hence exhibits a realist ontology) while being sceptical toward our ability to understand it (hence a critical epistemology). MacIntyre's scepticism carries a unique historical flavour but there is enough here that echoes critical realism for MacIntyre's work to suffer from the same misunderstandings that have beset critical realist work. Part of this problem is that readers schooled in modern treatments of research methods have learned neither to distinguish between ontology and epistemology nor to recognise that abjuring this distinction is itself characteristic of a distinctive position.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Burrell and Morgan's (1979) collapsing of ontology and epistemology into a single subjective-objective axis which along with the axis of stability and change serves to locate alternative research paradigms. For MacIntyre such approaches fail in their definition of axes and consequently in their attempt to fix boundaries around ideological commitment. What is missing from such accounts includes any notion of time. For MacIntyre intelligibility requires narrative and narrative requires historical awareness (1990, 1985 [1981]: 206, 210). Summarising MacIntyre's entire project Murphy writes:

"The path out of the moral wilderness is the formulation of an ethics of human nature where human nature is not merely a biological nature but also an historical and social nature – and the formulation of an historical, but not relativistic, account of rationality in inquiry." (2003: 7)

MacIntyre's commitment to historical understanding of the development of ideas is bound up with his critical realism – such is the intimacy of the relations between ideas and social structures that changes to both over time render redundant any attempt at a once-and-for-all determination of paradigms. Accustomed as we are to thinking about objectivist and subjectivist assumptions as either opposites or polarities along a dimension, an understanding of MacIntyre's position requires us to recognise that this way of thinking about ideas within social science is itself historically specific (Tsoukas and Cummings 1997). Indeed in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990) MacIntyre traces and dissects the histories of both objectivist and subjectivist approaches to moral enquiry (labelled as Encyclopaedia and Genealogy respectively).

In writing such an account historically and not analytically he was committed to, argued for and exemplified a different approach to doing social studies – one he labels not as 'critical realist' but as 'tradition'. In this approach enquiry is undertaken through using the best methods we have discovered up to now to determine the most accurate rendering of the truth that can be given up to now. And part of doing

intellectual work this way is the acknowledgment of the historical rootedness of our ideas, methods and results.

It turns out that we can only understand this if we have available to us a notion of tradition in which today's 'best so far' is only 'best so far' because it gives a better (according to the 'best so far' criteria we have of establishing merit) account of whatever it is we are considering than have previous accounts (see Borradori 1994: 262 for a brief version of this argument and MacIntyre 1988 for an extended version). The traditional approach to enquiry holds to a notion of truth which seeks neither the timelessness of law-like generalisations nor the dissolution of categories through which enquiry is undertaken (the end point of genealogy). Skinner and Foucault are likewise rejected.

If social theory involves neither testing hypotheses to adduce relations between variables in the cause of developing law-like generalisation allowing for control of social phenomena, nor deconstructing postulates in the cause of unmasking power relations, then what does it involve? For MacIntyre, social theory is active self-reflection in the context of practice; the notion of disengaged theorising is illusory. As early as 1953 he wrote that, "Hegel forgot what Kierkegaard remembered when Kierkegaard said that the tragedy of the speculative philosopher is that he must turn aside from his place as a spectator of time and eternity in order to sneeze" (MacIntyre 1995 [1953]: 16-17), and this opposition to speculative theory remains his position in his mature work (MacIntyre 1994a: 289).

His commitment to an engaged philosophy marks an aspect of MacIntyre's rejection of utilitarian and other supposedly 'rational' systems constructed in the Enlightenment. An early MacIntyre text (1964) captures this. Here he uses Dickens' contrast of Gradgrind's functional definition of a horse in *Hard Times* with the "living skill" of horse-riding (MacIntyre 1964: 5-6) to illustrate the point that abstract knowledge has "nothing to do with an ability to handle horses" (MacIntyre 1964: 6). Over thirty years later, his commentary on Marxism's detachment from practice echoes the same point (MacIntyre 1995 [1953]: xxviii-xxx).

From his earliest writings onwards, before his concept of a 'practice' became central to his mature project (for example MacIntyre 1995 [1953]: 60), through his commitments to and rejections of large portions of Marxism (Borradori 1994: 258-259), he has maintained that social theory should embody features of practical social life and that the proper purpose of theory is to enable practitioners to develop better understandings of that life. Further, the ability to resolve the disputes between or inconsistencies within previous theories rather than the ability to explain, predict and control behaviours is the hallmark of successful theorising (MacIntyre 1977a: 460).

Having set out the broad direction of MacIntyre's understanding of theorising and distinguishing it from what usually is required for systematic thinking to be labelled 'theory' we now turn to a representation of MacIntyre's theorising about organisations. Although subsequent reflections demonstrate MacIntyre's rejection of some key theses in his first significant publication in this area (particularly his preface to its most recent reissue (1995 [1953]: v-xxxi) *Marxism and Christianity* contains the condemnation of the capitalist mode of organisation that has persisted in his work (Murphy 2003: 3). In the section that follows we focus on two main features of this

criticism of contemporary organisations – the centrality of utilitarianism to corporate decision-making and the effects of work under capitalism. We then turn to *After Virtue* in 1981, as it is only from this point that a positive account of work in conditions of human flourishing can be found and the centrality of a conception of the virtues emerges.

## **MacIntyre on contemporary organisations, 1953 - 1980**

### *Decision-making in the capitalist mode*

The focus of MacIntyre's comments on contemporary organisations prior to *After Virtue* is overwhelmingly critical. MacIntyre does not detain readers long with distinctions between types of organisation within capitalism but consistently identifies capitalism both with modernity and bureaucracy as a mode of production. The distinction between public and private organisations is also subsumed in his work (MacIntyre 1964: 11; 1985 [1981]: 25) and there is no evidence to suggest, in so far as they take on bureaucratic form, that voluntary organisations are in any way exempt. His position explicitly follows Weber:

“Once the executive is at work the aims of the public or private corporation must be taken as given ... The business executive does not differ in this view of his task from other bureaucrats. Bureaucracies have been conceived, since Weber, as impersonal instruments for the realization of ends which characteristically they themselves do not determine.” (MacIntyre 1977b: 218)

Bureaucratic organisations resolve allocation questions through a utilitarian mode of decision-making that suffers all the incoherencies of both act and rule utilitarianism more widely. These are outlined in MacIntyre's paper *Against Utilitarianism* in 1964 and extended to include a wider range of arguments in the chapter cited above on *Utilitarianism and Cost Benefit Analysis* (1977), a precursor to work contained in *Corporate Modernity and Moral Judgment: are they Mutually Exclusive?* (1979).

Utilitarianism dominates organisational decision-making because “it provides us with our only public criterion for securing agreement on moral and political questions” (MacIntyre 1964: 2) but fails in its inability to *discover* ends or purposes. The manager learns to operate without noticing this failure because the boundaries that define corporate responsibility ostensibly leave issues of public good to government and the goodness of the product to the consumer (MacIntyre 1977b: 219). With such considerations apparently externalised the manager generates options for action, gives scales to incommensurable alternatives, establishes the weighting of options and determines both range and time-scale of affects to be accounted for, using a series of non-utilitarian normative and evaluative commitments (MacIntyre 1977b: 220-224). It is only once these decisions have been taken that the formal processes of cost-benefit analysis, job evaluation and so on provide the veneer of objectivity and allow the manager to ‘crunch the numbers’.

In an interesting echo of Milton Friedman (1970) MacIntyre asserts that one of the functions of this is to avoid the unmanageable conflict that would ensue from any

serious engagement with the claims that would follow should boundaries around the responsibilities of the role be removed (MacIntyre 1977b: 236-237). The difference is that for Friedman, unlike MacIntyre, ensuring that such questions do not arise is a good thing.

### *The effects of work*

In 1953 MacIntyre wrote approvingly of Marx's notion of alienation as a description of the condition of the worker under capitalism:

“Hence it is the worker's personality, his chance of a *properly human life* that is destroyed by his loss. In this the economic system is not interested. The worker owning only his own labor is, in the present system, nothing else but his labor, a mere commodity, no longer a person, but a thing.” (MacIntyre 1995 [1953]: 51, emphasis added)

Putting aside the question of whether this is an accurate portrayal of this or that or indeed of every worker's predicament under capitalism or indeed within any bureaucratic organisation, it is the notion of a “properly human life” and later an “essentially human life” (MacIntyre 1995 [1953]: 52) against which to contrast the assessment that is of particular interest. At this stage all MacIntyre offers by way of a positive notion of human life is repetition of Marx's nostrum of the “realized naturalism of men” (MacIntyre 1995 [1953]: 55). MacIntyre later argued that this notion found its origin in the German Romantic ideal (MacIntyre 1965 reprinted in 1978 [1971]: 66).

By this time he had already noted the limits industrialisation puts in the way of any such realisation, for it entails that, “all specifiable tasks for human beings can be reduced to routine movements which a machine can perform” (MacIntyre 1962: 67), thereby reducing any sense of “realized naturalism” or a “properly human life” to a grimly ironic and peculiarly undefined joke. It also engenders the distinction between those who manipulate and those who are manipulated that plays a central role in *After Virtue* some 16 years later, and which forms a core part of his contention that modernity is characterised by emotivism (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 11-12).

The manipulators were themselves no nearer realising an “essential humanity”. By the mid-1960's MacIntyre had taken Weber's description of the bureaucratic manager as read and accepted the transformation from individualist to what may be labelled *managerial* capitalism (Nielsen 2002) in a way that was not evident a decade earlier in *Marxism and Christianity*:

“The earliest critics of capitalism saw social power as in the hands of ‘Them’, when it ought to serve ‘Us’. But power is now, although it is no nearer ‘We’, not so much a matter of ‘They’ as ‘It’.” (MacIntyre 1964: 13)

And from this point forward the ‘It’ increasingly attracts MacIntyre's attention in the character of the bureaucratic manager. His descriptions in the 1964 paper prefigure much of what was to follow. Using Hegel's concept of ‘the spiritual Zoo’ he identifies managers as sharing the morality of those “who live in separate cages and choose not

to ask why there are bars or what lies outside them” (MacIntyre 1964: 14) but instead occupy themselves fully with the issues that lie to hand.

In similar vein *A Short History of Ethics* in 1967 sees the managers of the holocaust as epitomizing a utilitarian orientation in which “specialists such as Eichmann ... boasted that they merely discharged their function in arranging for so much transport to be provided between point X and point Y. Whether the cargo was sheep or Jews, whether points X and Y were farm and butcher’s slaughterhouse or ghetto and gas chamber, was no concern of theirs” (MacIntyre 1967: 207-208).

MacIntyre next addresses workplace issues in something other than passing commentary some twelve years later through his involvement with a University of Notre Dame Project involving executives in the electrical power industry. This resulted in his most detailed work on organisations to date. His role in this project, coming at a time of “sometimes painful self-critical reflection” (Reddiford and Watts Miller 1991; Miller 1994: 268) appears significant to his wider corpus as the papers that resulted presage a number of the arguments subsequently found in *After Virtue*.

The role of the bureaucratic manager was still geared to the performance of utilitarian calculations designed to enhance organisational effectiveness but a more dramatic implication had become evident. For while the manager (in any bureaucratic organisation) remained in the spiritual zoo, systematically excluding from his purview considerations “which he might feel obliged to recognise were he acting as parent, as consumer, or as citizen” (MacIntyre 1979: 126), he also carried roles as parent, consumer and citizen. Those who fulfilled these roles were now seen as compartmentalised selves for whom adaptability in changing their ostensive character was an essential quality: “in the modern corporate organization character has become more like a mask or a suit of clothing; an agent may have to possess more than one” (MacIntyre 1979: 125). In private correspondence MacIntyre has confirmed to us that his thinking was in part developed through empirical work in which hypothetical scenarios were put to the power company executives (6 October 2005).

In a world “dominated by corporations” (MacIntyre 1979: 128) their presentation as moral beings “splinters morality into disassociated parts” (MacIntyre 1979: 124), a partitioning unique to corporate modernity. The importance of MacIntyre’s work with practicing managers is that the publication which followed introduces for the first time in his writing the contrast between the partitioned morality of corporate modernity and the integrated morality of practice-based communities in “a total order which both integrates diverse roles and subordinate orders” (MacIntyre 1979: 132). The observed weaknesses of managers’ utilitarian thinking and the fragmented existence of managers under corporate capitalism both illustrates the intimacy between social structures and social ideology and justifies the project of creating an alternative, a project he was to begin with *After Virtue*:

“What positively would have to be the case to provide the conditions for a society in which *man as such* and of rational criteria could have a place? To answer this question would require more than a single paper.” (MacIntyre 1979: 132)



## **MacIntyre on contemporary organisations, 1981 - 1999: a ‘general theory’ of virtues, goods, practices and institutions**

*After Virtue* combines an account of the failure of the Enlightenment project of developing a universal rational morality with a case for recovering the virtue-based account of morality that it wrongly attempted to supersede. Reflecting MacIntyre’s continuing view of the intimacy of theoretical and practical social developments is an account of social development and particularly that of the fragmented morality of the corporate organisation that both reflects and fosters the state of moral theory. Part of what the Enlightenment forgot and bureaucracies private or public have never fully accounted for is a distinction between the two categories of good whose creation results from socially co-operative practices. As early as 1964 MacIntyre hinted at this issue:

“The production of consumption is as much a mark of our society as the consumption of what is produced. Hence each becomes a means to the other and we find once more a chain of activity in which everything is done for the sake of something else and *nothing is done for its own sake.*” (MacIntyre 1964: 8-9, emphasis added)

The obliteration of ends, as we have seen, is a central weakness of the utilitarian mode of decision-making, the corporate form that masks it and the men and women whose lives it characterises.

In *After Virtue* MacIntyre introduced a new language to describe both the distinction between goods that are proper ends – internal goods, and those “done for the sake of something else” – external goods, and the relationship of these to virtues, practices and institutions. Parts of this ‘general theory’ have been used by various commentators, with the emphasis usually on the notions of virtues and practices. But it is clear that MacIntyre intended his contribution to be an integrated schema (one exception to this partial usage is that by Moore 2002, 2005a, 2005b.).

There is then a tension between these two different types of goods (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 188-189). Internal goods, such as those obtainable from loving relationships, playing or listening to a piece of music, or from various kinds of intellectual stimulation are generally derivable from the exercise of the virtues in a search for excellence within the context of a particular practice. By contrast external goods such as prestige, status or money can be achieved in a variety of alternative ways not linked to any particular practice. These are referred to as “goods of effectiveness”, as opposed to internal goods which are “goods of excellence”. That these different types of goods (they are *both* genuinely “goods”) are mutually reinforcing should be evident. As MacIntyre puts it:

“It would be a large misconception to suppose that allegiance to goods of the one kind necessarily excluded allegiance to goods of the other ... Thus the goods of excellence cannot be systematically cultivated unless at least some of the goods of effectiveness are also pursued. On the other hand it is difficult in most social contexts to pursue the goods of effectiveness without cultivating at least to some degree the goods of excellence ...” (MacIntyre 1988: 35)

However, while in the ideal situation these different kinds of goods are mutually reinforcing, it is clear from MacIntyre's work that internal goods should be privileged over external goods if the good life is to be achieved. The danger is that the opposite occurs. MacIntyre warns: "[w]e should therefore expect that, if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues [necessary for the achievement of internal goods] might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement, although simulacra might abound" (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 196).

There is the beginning here of the link between virtues and goods, but in order to understand this more fully we require MacIntyre's concept of a practice. His oft-quoted definition is as follows:

"Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 187)

The concept of a practice allows MacIntyre to move from an initial definition of virtues ("dispositions not only to act in particular ways but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously ... is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues" (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 149)), to link virtues with internal goods and practices more specifically:

"A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods." (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 191)

MacIntyre illustrates this relationship between virtues and practices by reference to examples including football, chess, architecture, seascape painting and cricket (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 187, 191) and argues that, "it is not difficult to show for a whole range of key virtues that without them the goods internal to practices are barred to us ..." (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 191). It is also clear that there is considerable breadth in his concept of a practice (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 188), and this can be regarded both as a strength and, as we shall discuss below, a weakness of his 'general theory'.

Virtues, however, are not simply practice-specific, but span and are applicable to all practices and situations in which an individual is involved. Not only this, but the virtues are also set within the context of the notion of *telos* – the good for man (*sic*): "[t]he virtues are precisely those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* [generally defined as well-being] and the lack of which will frustrate his movement toward that *telos*" (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 148). Thus we have a situation in which the virtues enable the individual to achieve the goods internal to practices, and the achievement of those goods across a variety of

practices and over time is instrumental in the individual's search for and movement towards their own *telos*.

We thus arrive at a point in MacIntyre's 'general theory' at which the concept of a *quest* becomes important. For the virtues are clearly not ends in themselves but means to the end of achieving the individual's *telos*. MacIntyre makes the point that without some partly determinate conception of the final *telos* there could not be any beginning to a quest. This initial conception of the *telos* comes from the amalgamation of the internal goods from individual practices to some notion of *the good*. But in addition to this, there is within the concept of the quest the idea that it is a search for something which is not yet "adequately characterised" and that it is through the search that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. So the *telos* is both partially known and unknown, and in the quest for the unknown, we also refine our understanding of the known (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 218-219).

This brings us to the concept of the unity of a person's life, in which a life can be conceived of and evaluated only as a whole. But to evaluate a person's life as a whole requires the context of the relationships they are involved in and the possible shared future of those relationships – and this in turn requires that we understand the "story" of that person's life.

Men and women are narrative animals – that is, life is lived inside a story of which the individual is the subject, but also in which there are interlocking narratives with others (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 217-218). This is to say that an individual's story began before she was born (and will continue after she dies) and that she entered life as part of a continuing narrative. It is only within the context of this continuing and communal narrative that she can make sense of herself and that she can begin to make some sense of her *telos*. Initially this *telos* is derived from the experiences of early childhood, but gradually it becomes hers as she embarks on her own narrative quest. Thus, the narrative quest ("where is my story going?") is both *teleological* and also part of its own answer. In other words, as we have noted, it is not a quest for the already known, but a quest in which the *telos* will become clearer on the way.

This concept of the narrative quest leads MacIntyre to a further refinement of his definition of the virtues:

"The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good." (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 219)

It is important to emphasise that this sense of *telos* and the narrative quest is by no means an individual matter. McCann and Brownsberger summarise MacIntyre well at this point and helpfully link the concepts of practice and community. It is worth quoting them at length:

“... the normative character of MacIntyre’s definition of a social practice ... is secured within a larger account of the moral life as a whole. There must be some *telos* to human life, a vision anticipating the moral unity of life, given in the form of a narrative history that has meaning within a particular community’s traditions; otherwise the various internal goods generated by the range of social practices will remain disordered and potentially subversive of one another. Without a community’s shared sense of *telos*, there will be no way of signifying ‘the overriding good’ by which various internal goods may be ranked and evaluated.” (McCann and Brownsberger 1990: 227-228)

This, then, affirms the essential intertwining of the individual, and his or her own narrative quest, with the community, and its shared sense of *telos*. It is in community that the virtues are developed and (partially) for whose good they are exercised.

However, this initial virtues-practice schema, in which internal goods attainable at the individual level are to the fore but in the context of community, needs to be extended by the addition of the institution that houses the practice – at which point both external goods and organisations (as a particular form of institution) enter the frame. MacIntyre writes:

“Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with ... external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions – and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question – that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution. In this context the essential feature of the virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions.” (MacIntyre 1985 [1981]: 194)

Thus, institutions form an essential part of MacIntyre’s ‘general theory’. Without them his schema is incomplete. With them we begin to understand why MacIntyre takes such a critical stance towards capitalist organisations – organisations which in his view have, in effect, ‘won’ over the practice that is actually at their core and whose justification is the pursuit of the goods of effectiveness. MacIntyre’s critique, as we have seen above but expressed now in the terms of his ‘general theory’, is that “much modern industrial productive and service work is organised so as to exclude the features distinctive of a practice” and in such a way that this type of activity is “at once alien and antagonistic to practices” (MacIntyre 1994a: 286). Thus, capitalist and other bureaucratic organisations fail to provide the kind of conducive environment within which the virtues may flourish and internal goods (the goods of excellence) may be achieved.

It might be thought that, within the context of his ‘general theory’, MacIntyre would hold out some sympathy towards managers, locked as they are inside such capitalist organisations. In his 1999 lecture *Social structure and their threats to moral agency*, MacIntyre addresses this by returning both to Eichmann and to the life of managers as compartmentalised selves. He discusses the extent to which social structure undermines the development of the type of understanding required by agents to see themselves as having a moral identity distinguishable from their social role(s). However, his position on the moral responsibility of managers has been amended.

Whereas the 1964 MacIntyre asserts that, “[t]he faceless men of the contemporary corporation are themselves instruments not by virtue of some act of will of their own ... but by virtue of the *structure of the corporation*” (MacIntyre 1964: 13, emphasis added), such determinism is heavily conditioned in the 1999 account. Here, although “there is indeed a type of social structure that warrants for those who inhabit it a plea of diminished responsibility” (MacIntyre 1999a: 325), the plea is not accepted for managers in contemporary organisations.

Drawing again from the studies of power company executives, MacIntyre’s notion of compartmentalisation sees managers as playing a more active part. The ability to change roles and role requirements as the agent moves between social settings is named as a peculiarly modern virtue, a “dramatic feat” (MacIntyre 1999a: 326). Moreover MacIntyre now asserts that its achievement necessarily involves a deliberate termination of the agent’s practical reasoning in order to resist *inescapable* questions that might undermine the conduct of the managerial role. For MacIntyre this habitual discipline of intellectual abstinence requires the active co-operation of the individual manager who is thus regarded as a co-author of his or her own divided state (MacIntyre 1999a: 327).

### **MacIntyre in the Organisational Sciences**

From the publication of *After Virtue* onwards MacIntyre’s influence and reputation have grown. This is replicated in the literatures of a number of professions (for example, Lambeth 1990; Sellman 2000; Leeper and Leeper 2001), in business ethics (for example, Beadle 2002; Brewer 1997; Dawson and Bartholomew 2003; Dobson 1996, 1997, 2001; Horvarth 1995; McCann and Brownsberger 1990; Mintz 1996; Moore 2002, 2005a, 2005b; Wicks 1996, 1997) and organisational thought (for example, Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Anthony 1986; Du Gay 1998, 2000; Mangham 1995).

The distinction we draw here between these literatures belies some of their similarities but trends can nevertheless be discerned. The professional literatures commonly attempt to establish the relevant profession as a practice, hence Lambeth’s (1990) argument in respect of journalism, Sellman’s (2000) for nursing, Brewer’s for management (1997), Leeper and Leeper’s (2001) for public relations and most recently Dunne and Hogan (2004) on teaching, a volume of papers animated by the rejection of MacIntyre’s view (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002) that teaching is not a practice itself, and in which some contributors go almost so far as to assert that MacIntyre does not understand his own concept.

Whilst each of these papers merits individual consideration a degree of commonality is evident. Many engage in the same arguments as one another whilst appearing ignorant of each other's existence and of MacIntyre's work beyond the pages of *After Virtue*. All identify relevant internal goods with the ambition of establishing these as a warrant for awarding their profession the status of a practice. The problem with this however (and not the only problem for some, see Beadle 2002) is that the establishment of internal goods is a necessary but insufficient condition for the identification of a practice – the neglected conditions being around the role of the practice in the narrative of an individual's life, the tradition of the community to which individuals belong and the inter-connected role of institutions. These are exactly the conditions that MacIntyre identifies as being absent in teaching where he asserts:

“it is part of my claim that teaching is never more than a means, that it has no point and purpose except for the point and purpose of the activities to which it introduces students. All teaching is for the sake of something else and so teaching does not have its own goods. The life of a teacher is therefore not a specific kind of life.” (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002: 9)

The project of elevating professions to the status of practices turns on the specificity of the kind of life in which practitioners engage and this is just one more reason why small working communities are the ideal environment for the development of the practices and why industrial society, by drawing work outside the context of such communities and households, is so destructive of them (MacIntyre: 1985 [1981]: 229).

The ongoing contestability of MacIntyre's concept of a practice is problematic however. In part this is MacIntyre's own fault. The paucity of his organisational examples and the ambiguity of his definition (Miller 1994) perhaps encourages the rationally interminable debate, of which he has written in other contexts, to be a feature of arguments about his own work.

The business ethics literature runs up against a somewhat different range of conceptual and practical difficulties (Knight 1994: 283). In his paper *Does applied ethics rest on a mistake?* (1984) MacIntyre's affirmative answer appears to rule out any normative business ethics for sharing with other areas of applied ethics a falsely elevated notion of the philosophical importance of immediate factual context. This has not put business ethicists off, however. Horvath (1995) goes so far as to argue that a MacIntyre-style Virtue Ethics should become the paradigm for business ethics, applying MacIntyre's critiques of Enlightenment thinking to suggest that utilitarian and deontological approaches provide inadequate bases for business ethics, whilst largely sidestepping MacIntyre's own condemnation of corporate modernity. Similarly, McCann and Brownsberger (1990) argue that business can be a context for the development of the virtues. A contest between Dobson and Wicks in their 1996 and 1997 papers broadly turned on the justification for MacIntyre's condemnation of capitalism, an issue revisited by Beadle (2002) and Moore (2002) and summarised by Dobson and Bartholomew (2003).

The literature we broadly identify as falling within organisational theory has been more critical of MacIntyre and in particular of his condemnation of management.

Anthony (1996) argues that MacIntyre mistakes the activity of management with Weber's characterisation of it (174-180), while Du Gay's (1998, 2000) criticism is effectively a justification of context-specific rationalities such as that established by Weber for management (though Tester (2000) argues from the opposite perspective that MacIntyre does not so much oppose as misreads Weber). The critical management literature tends to cite MacIntyre loosely as a fellow traveller (Alvesson and Willmott 1992) in the condemnation of management and capitalism while ignoring his opposition to their post-modern epistemology, though Mangham (1995) is an exception.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to show that MacIntyre's judgments on the bureaucratic organisations that characterise the institutional form of modernity have remained consistent from the 1950s. What has developed is a theory for authoritatively justifying these judgements – a theory both about capitalism and about why it is wrong. MacIntyre established the centrality of the task of authoritatively justifying Marxism's condemnation of capitalism as early as 1953 (MacIntyre 1995 [1953]) and its notion of human life unencumbered by capitalism in 1965 (reprinted in MacIntyre 1978 [1971]: 66).

Its resolution has required the development of both a substantive notion of human nature to which the virtues are central (MacIntyre 1985 [1981], 1999b) and a theory demonstrating their systematic dependence on a form of institutionalisation alien to the dominant forms of corporate modernity whether public or private sector. Indeed Murphy sees the vindication of MacIntyre's condemnation of capitalism as the central task of MacIntyre's work (Murphy 2003: 7). In developing this latter argument MacIntyre has critiqued both the effects of corporate modernity and its conceptual confusions (MacIntyre 1977b, 1979 and 1985 [1981]). The relationship between these is intimate but the responsibility of individual managers for their own vice is clearer in more recent work (MacIntyre 1999a) than in earlier representations.

Developing MacIntyre's ideas in the context of organisations has, however, run up against a series of obstacles and the application of MacIntyre's work evidences the type of rational interminability (and indeed repetitiveness) that MacIntyre regards as emblematic of modern moral dialogue as a whole. The problem of applying MacIntyre's concepts, as he himself has admitted, is that a great deal more needs to be said about the concept of a practice and the idea of internal goods than has been said so far (Reddiford and Watts Miller 1991: 273-274). The dispute over the status of teaching is emblematic of the uses to which the definitions he has given can be put. Equally those who contest his condemnation of capitalism and those who support it appear locked in interminable struggle.

What is also evident is the lack of empirical work undertaken using MacIntyre's concepts. This sits oddly with his emphasis on practice and with the clear task of filling in the gaps in the dynamic aspects of his theory. MacIntyre has, as we noted above, maintained that social theory should embody features of practical social life and that the proper purpose of theory is to develop better understandings of that life. Much more needs to be done to establish how the virtues work (literally) in practice to

enable the creation of internal goods and how such development is corrupted by the lure of external goods.

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